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ABSTRACT

Increasing enrollments and budget problems have prompted many school districts nationwide to experiment with year-round school schedules. Year-round school schedules allow districts to serve more students without constructing more buildings. As in traditional 9-month schools, students in year-round schools attend classes about 180 days a year. The students are divided into groups and school-year starting dates are staggered so there is always a portion of students on vacation. In the 45-15 plan, four groups of students attend school for 45 days, and then have 15 days off. The Concept 6 plan divides the calendar year into six 2-month blocks. Three tracks of students have classes for 4 consecutive months and then a vacation for 2 months. Another year-round schedule divides the school year into five 45-day terms, or quinmesters. It is clear a year-round-school schedule can save an expanding district money over constructing a new school, but transition costs can be high. Academic achievement apparently is not harmed in year-round schools and curriculum can be more varied. To be successful, year-round schools must have the support of the community, since they can disrupt family life and vacation schedules. (JPT)

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Policy Considerations In Conversion to Year-Round Schools

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Increasing enrollments at a time of tight budgets plague school districts around the country. In about thirty states, districts have experimented with year-round schools in an attempt to serve more students without constructing more buildings. The Los Angeles (CA) Unified School District is one of several districts that have converted many schools to a year-round schedule.

In year-round schools, as in traditional nine-month schools, students attend classes about 180 days spread throughout the twelve calendar months. Typically, the student body is divided into three, four or five groups; school year starting dates are staggered so that at any one time, between one-third and one- fifth of the students are on vacation. In the most popular year- round schedule, the 45-15 plan, four groups of students attend school for forty-five days, or about nine weeks, and then have fifteen days off. Building capacity can be increased 25% because one-quarter of the student body is always on vacation. The 45-15 plan is popular because all students have a summer vacation, even if it is a shorter one. It is not, however, favored by high schools because the short, three-week vacations limit summer job opportunities. In the Concept 6 year-round plan, the calendar year is divided into six two-month blocks. The students, in three tracks, have classes for four consecutive months and then a vacation for two months. Concept 6 can accommodate a one-third enrollment increase. Because the students attend two four-month terms a year, the administrative burdens of scheduling classes and recording grades are not as heavy as in the 45-15 plan. One third of the students will have no summer vacation at all; in areas with great seasonal temperature variations, this track will be unpopular. Concept 6, then, can meet with a great deal of community resistance when the students' tracks are mandated and not freely chosen.

Another year-round schedule is the quinmester. Five 45-day terms, or quins, make up the year; students attend four of the five quins. In some districts, the fifth quin is optional; students who desire acceleration or enrichment or who need remediation, attend all five terms. Obviously, if many students take advantage of this option, the district does not save money, because the enrollment remains the same as in traditional schools. There are many other year-round schedules, such as the trimester or quarter systems. The rationale for most, however, is the same: to avoid construction of new schools by increasing enrollment at existing schools. The advantages of year-round schools can theoretically extend beyond a district's pocketbook. Some of the advantages most often claimed for year-

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round schools are listed below:

- –Districts may be able to save money by avoiding school construction.
- –Students may retain more over shorter vacations; thus, they may need less review at the beginning of the year.
- –Because breaks will be more frequent, teachers might not experience burnout.
- –Some families might welcome opportunities for vacations in all seasons; vacation spots will be less crowded.

Critics of year-round schools cite several objections to year-round schools in defending traditional nine-month calendars.

- –Operating costs may rise; administrative workloads might increase.
- –District services, such as special education and teacher workshops, may be difficult to schedule.
- –Family life might be disrupted: year-round schools can complicate child-care and vacation plans.
- –Children might be bored during vacations because traditional options like summer camp and sports programs are often not available.

Determining which of the claimed advantages and disadvantages are in fact true requires a look at what has actually happened in year-round schools. The authors of this paper have been actively engaged in evaluating year-round programs in Colorado for over a decade (Smith and Glass, 1975; Smith and Glass, 1976; George and Glass, 1982; George and Glass, 1983); they draw upon their own experience as well as upon documents from some of the over one hundred districts nationwide that have implemented year-round programs. What follows is an attempt to summarize some of the findings.

DO YEAR ROUND SCHOOLS SAVE MONEY?

Conversion to a year-round schedule costs less than new buildings; three year-round schools can accommodate the enrollment of four traditional schools. Year-round programs, therefore, appeal to administrators in growing districts where school bond elections are lost. The Pajaro Valley School District, in a largely agricultural area in northern California, found itself in 1971 with 15% more students than its schools could serve on a nine-month calendar (Burnett, 1978). Although its per pupil costs were below state and national averages, the electorate failed to pass ten consecutive bond issues and tax overrides. At the same time, the community was dissatisfied with double sessions. Five schools were thus converted to a 45-15 plan; five years later, an evaluation showed that the year-round schedule had effected a 4.1% reduction in per pupil cost, largely due to avoidance of construction and to more efficient use of existing facilities. Surprisingly, operating costs also fell slightly, despite rising administrative costs. Through skillful balance of extending and shortening contracts, teacher wages and benefits actually decreased when calculated per pupil.

Most school districts that record data also report savings, generally of one to three percent (Shepard, 1975). Prince William County School District in Virginia saved an estimated 4.2% in school facilities costs. Contrary to critics' claims that energy costs increase in year-round schools, Prince William County found that when computed on a per pupil basis, these expenditures were about the same as in traditional schools (Shepard, 1975). The cost of busing does not have to rise, either, if the student tracks are determined along geographic lines.

Clearly, a year-round operation can save a school district the capital outlay for new buildings. But year-round schools are not always the bargain they appear to be. For instance, the cost of transition can be high: preliminary studies must be funded, public relations campaigns are often launched, and the curriculum must be revised to fit the shorter school terms. All of this takes staff time away from other school business.

Transition costs are a one-time budget item. Increased operating costs, however, are not. Contrary to the Pajaro Valley experience, most districts report increased operating costs after transition to the year-round calendar. Secretarial and custodial contracts

must be extended, as well as the services of cooks, nurses, counselors, and school psychologists. Principals' workloads increase. One Colorado district found that it had to hire vice-principals for its year-round elementary schools. Opportunity costs must also be considered. As the administrative burdens increase, the use of principals' time changes; their management of other, and perhaps more important school concerns such as curriculum and personnel, may suffer.

In short, as the Stanford Research Institute concluded in a 1978 study (Pelavin, 1979), year-round schools can save money if they are properly implemented. Behind this "if" are a great many considerations:

if year-round schools are operated at full capacity;
if tracks are mandated, not elective;
if the district refuses to accommodate parents who prefer traditional schools;
if staff contracts are efficiently ad justed;
if community growth rates continue to rise;
if many, not few, schools are con verted to a year-round sched ule;
then, savings are more likely to be realized.

Two cautions should be mentioned here. M .s Shepard, in reviewing twenty-four yea round programs, suggested that the attitude of the state government toward year-round schools contributes to the success or failure of programs at the district level (Shepard, 1975). The Francis Howell School District (MO) experienced difficulty in acquiring state aid and reimbursement for its year-round expenses because Missouri had enacted no legislation even recognizing the existence of year-round schools. Atlanta, (GA) schools faced similar problems. The California legislature, on the other hand, actively promotes year-round scheduling, and provides technical and financial assistance in implementing, operating, and evaluating year-round programs. This may help to explain why California has more year-round schools than any other state.

Finally, as Smith and Glass (1975) stressed in their evaluation of the Cherry Creek District 5 (CO) program, year- round schools are not the only, and are certainly not the least expensive, cost-cutting option for financially strapped, growing school districts. Cheaper measures include scheduling double sessions, and using temporary buildings. Redistributing the enrollment by busing and redrawing attendance boundaries can also relieve overcrowding. Before choosing year-round operation, school districts might also consider leasing space or services from neighboring districts or expanding existing buildings.

DO YEAR ROUND SCHOOLS IMPROVE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT?

Year-round schools are principally a cost-cutting measure. Therefore, the major educational concern is that they not hinder student achievement. There is no indication in available reports that achievement suffers in year-round schools.

Cherry Creek District 5 implemented year-round schools in 1974. After one year, student achievement in three year-round schools was compared to achievement in traditional calendar schools. Differences between standardized test scores in the two types of schools were found to be insignificantly small even after matching pupils on IQ. Similar findings are reported for the year-round programs in Colorado and across the country. For example, examination of three years of standardized test scores for Mesa County Valley School District (CO) indicates that the year-round schedule does not in any way interfere with learning.

Many teachers and parents who favor year-round schedules believe that students learn more and faster when the learning process is interrupted for only short periods of time, as it is on the 45-15 plan. Even in Concept 6 schools as in Colorado Springs, Colorado, the majority of the teachers in year-round schools rates their pupils' vacation learning loss as less severe than in traditional schools (Shepard, 1975). Smith and Glass attempted to substantiate teachers' perceptions in Cherry Creek District 5. They found that although teachers in year-round

schools spent less time reviewing pre-vacation material than teachers in nine-month schools did, the actual achievement differences were insignificant on tests designed specifically to measure district objectives.

Another frequently cited educational advantage is that year- round schools facilitate curricular innovation. Indeed, of the programs Shepard (1975) investigated, twenty had changed the curriculum when they converted to the year-round schedule. In many schools, the curriculum must be tailored to the shorter terms. In others, especially in smaller schools, instruction must be individualized. Smith and Glass (1975) found that the flexibility of the educational program greatly contributed to the effectiveness of the year-round program in Cherry Creek. Year-round schools, then, seem to stimulate development of individualized, flexible, and innovative curricula, but the change is not reflected directly in student achievement.

DO YEAR ROUND SCHOOLS DISRUPT THE LIVES OF THOSE INVOLVED?

Because year-round calendars differ so radically from tradition, they must have the support of the community in general and the parents in particular to succeed. For that reason, districts usually survey parent attitudes after implementation of the year-round schedule. Cherry Creek District 5, for instance, questioned over three hundred parents about inconveniences and advantages after the first year of the program. About two-thirds of the parents reported a preference for the year-round schedule; 80% believed it helped children maintain more momentum for learning. Mesa County Valley School District and other year- round schools nationwide report similar levels of parent acceptance (George and Glass, 1983; Shepard, 1975).

The Pajaro Valley School District polled almost one thousand parents after the fifth year of the year-round program. Responses of parents whose children attended year-round schools were compared with those whose children followed the traditional calendar. Both groups of parents were equally satisfied with the schools. Interestingly, there were no differences in reported difficulty of arranging child care. The district also found that parent attitudes had become progressively more positive as the program continued.

The year-round schedule, however, brings about inconveniences for many families. In Mesa County, more than half the families with children in both year-round elementary schools and traditional high schools felt that the different school schedules created serious problems. More than 20% complained of the lack of recreational activities during vacation. Attitudes toward vacation planning were mixed. In Cherry Creek, about one third of the parents felt that year round schools complicated vacation arrangements, while one-half reported that vacations were easier to plan.

Negative parent attitudes can be aggravated when the school districts, not the parents, choose the children's tracks. For example, families in Jefferson County, Colorado, whose children were out of school in September-October and March-April complained bitterly about their lack of vacation options. Children who have shortened summer vacations or even none at all may not be able to participate in summer recreation programs, sports, or camps. This last example illustrates the importance of district-level commitment to the year-round calendar. If only a few schools convert, there is little reason for other community agencies to change their vacation programs to serve children in year-round schools.

Like parents, teachers in year-round schools have generally positive attitudes, and their acceptance of the revised school calendar increases over time. Teachers in Mesa County Valley School District, for example, reported having no problems with the vacation times of the year-round schedule. In fact, they felt that the more frequent breaks of the year-round calendar reduced burnout. The year-round calendar offers another advantage to teachers: it often creates the opportunity for them to work eleven months a year. Many favor this option over seeking temporary jobs. Teachers experience problems with year- round schools as well. Pajaro Valley teachers reported difficulties coordinating schools' activities; Cherry Creek teachers need more time for long-term planning; and Mesa County teachers reported a weakening of staff camaraderie.

CONCLUSIONS

Year-round schools can work. They can accomplish their principal goal of saving money by avoiding construction of new buildings. They do not hinder student achievement, and they can become acceptable to the majority of parents and teachers.

However, savings may never be realized and the community may never accept the year-round schedule if

- –the program is not coordinated with parents' lives and community activities.
- –the program is limited to one or two schools on an experimental basis but never broadened.
- –full enrollment is not achieved.
- –the school can not accommodate greater individualization of the curriculum.

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